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NEW ENGLAND FUNERALS.

IN New England villages, where all the inhabitants were acquainted with each other, the news of a death circulated rapidly, and "everybody went" to the funeral, which was usually held at the house, involving much care at a time when the friends were least able to bear it.

The relatives and most intimate friends were generally seated in an upper room, and the officiating minister stood on the stairs, where he could be heard above and below. The service over, "the person having charge of the funeral," known on festive occasions as the master of ceremonies, standing on the stairs, called in a loud tone the names of the mourners in the order in which they were to come down, and family after family passed out to take their proper place in the procession. This list was carefully prepared, and it had need to be: to give the names of the immediate family was easy enough, but when it came to settling the precise place of the far-off branches, the task was a hard one, and there was often much bitter feeling when by some inadvertence the shade and degree of kindred have been forgotten or misunderstood. Brothers and their families must come before sisters, nephews took precedence of nieces. "The Woman's Hour," of which we hear so much now, had not struck in the New England of 1800.

To us looking back upon those days, how grim and forbidding many of the customs seem! The idea of dressing the dead in the garments they had worn in life was almost unknown, and the unnatural dress added one more to the painful associations. As late as fifty years ago, young girls were dressed for the grave with plaited-bordered caps, concealing sometimes the loveliest and most luxuriant hair. The floral decorations, now so abundant, were a thing unknown. The custom of strewing the bier or the grave with flowers is old, older than Christianity,—though to that, as to so many ancient customs, the gospel gave a new and beautiful significance,—but New England has long retained traces of the harsh and unlovely characteristics of her early days, not only derived from a gloomy ancestry, but also strengthened by the struggle with life and labor,—a struggle which, giving so little opportunity for the amenities of life, sometimes destroyed all inclination for them.

I have been told by a friend that in 1855 she was assisting in some preparations for the funeral of a young girl who had died, after a short illness, away from home. As she stood beside the coffin, she felt that she could not endure its cold bare look, void of all beauty, and she said: "I cannot bear the thought of laying her away without

a flower; can't we get some flowers?" It was in the very earliest days of spring, and having no flowers accessible, she asked if some one would go to the woods near by, and bring a handful of the tender young sprays of leaves just budding, — something to suggest a thought of the freshness of hope and of life, — but her proposition was received with such a stare of surprise and an air of disapproval that she said no more.

It was understood that every person must have an opportunity to look at the dead, and indeed there are many persons living to-day who would consider themselves defrauded if such an opportunity were refused. I have heard a ghastly story of a woman who some eighty years ago was burnt to death. Contrary to all modern ideas of propriety, her poor remains were, according to the custom of the time, exposed to view at the funeral. Two elderly women persuaded several young girls who were averse to the painful sight to go and look, adding the remark which then, as now, supplemented any especially unpleasant requirement, "It is your duty to do it." The result of the duty was, in the case of two sensitive young creatures, such a shock to the nerves that for weeks they were unable to sleep in quiet, and their parents watched a part of every night at their bedside.

There is still a belief among the superstitious that the dead will reappear in the dreams of one who has looked at them unless he has taken the precaution of touching them.

Refreshments were offered at the house when the company had assembled, and when friends gathered, as they often did, from great distances, it was a proper and natural custom; but it was too often merely an excuse for drinking, in the days when liquor flowed on any and every occasion. We are told in the History of Norton that it was the custom to offer liquor not only at weddings and funerals and informal social calls, but even at town meetings, and notably at the time of "venduing the poor."

Formerly, the friends remained by the grave until it was filled; in later time the coffin was placed beside the open grave, and the person in charge said, "I will see that the corpse is decently interred." The chief mourner, or nearest male relative, then turning to the persons present thanked them for their attention and kindness. This speech of thanks has sometimes been made by the master of ceremonies "in behalf of the friends of the deceased."

A century ago the custom of wearing mourning was universal. It would have shown a sad want of respect to the departed had their nearest friends failed to make this change of dress. And I have heard old persons speak of their recollection of the labor and expense involved when a large family was "called into mourning,"

as the phrase went. Although there have always been a few vigorous protestants against this custom, yet until recently they have been but few, and little heed has been paid to their words. It is but a few years since a zealous but illiterate preacher in Maine, called to officiate at a funeral, commenced his service in the following impressive words: "It is sad to see so many persons clad in the *habliments* of woe."

Whittier's beautiful poem has made many persons familiar with the custom of telling the bees of a death in the family. The news should be told at each hive, and at the same time a bit of crape tied on the hive. This is with most of us a matter of tradition only; I know a few persons who remember seeing it done in 1842.

There were many superstitions connected with death: it is an old fancy that mirrors should be covered when there is a death in the house; it seems to have been feared that if they were left exposed, the face of the dead might be seen in them. The breaking of a mirror, which in so many nations and ages was supposed to foretell misfortune, has been in New England thought to be a warning of death; so, too, was the falling of a picture from the wall, especially if it were the portrait of some individual. Mysterious sounds, ghostly tappings at the windows, the howling of some restless, uneasy dog, the creaking of stairs,—the manifold sounds which the stillness of night allows a wakeful ear to catch,—all these were among the signs and omens remembered after the coming of calamity, and treasured for future warnings. If a body lay unburied over Sunday, it was "a sure sign" that there would be another death in town before the end of the week. Suicides, too, never came singly; one was sure to be soon followed by another. These old beliefs cling to the memory of those who deny having any faith in them, yet who will go a long way round to avoid meeting a hearse, which, whether filled or empty, is equally of ill-omen.

It was once common for families to have private burial-places near the house, and in a long ride through a scattered country village one may pass many of these little home cemeteries, where two or three white stones gleam among the trees. In some instances, when farms change owners, these graves are levelled and their contents removed to the nearest burying ground, or farms have been sold with the agreement that the graves shall be cared for and not disturbed. But in the course of time, and probably not a long time, they will all disappear.

It was the custom (in many places still prevalent) for the relatives to go back to the house to tea. We refuse to believe the cynical remark attributed to Dean Swift, that "the merriest faces are seen in mourning-coaches," but it is certain that these assemblies of

mourning relatives were not a very sorrowful company. In a large family circle, there were many whose connection with the departed was distant, and their knowledge of him slight; and sorrow had been so diluted as to become little more than a mild gravity.

These tea-drinkings were a survival of the funeral feasts known in some form in all lands and ages, recalling to readers of Shakespeare those "funeral-baked meats" so thriftily used for the marriage which "followed hard upon."

Formerly the bell was tolled while the procession was on its way to the grave, and at intervals during the burial. In some towns the bell is tolled to announce a death,—usually at sunrise after the death occurs. After tolling some minutes there is a pause, and then commences a series of more rapid strokes in number equalling the years of the deceased. This custom, too, is rapidly passing away. Holmes refers to it in his story of "Elsie Venner."

Hearses in New England villages are a modern innovation. Formerly the dead were carried to the grave on a bier, and where the distance was short this was not inconvenient. But in some cases it involved much hardship and discomfort. In the extremes of heat and cold, the task was sometimes almost unendurable; and we must remember the extremes of age, too, for the bearers were generally, as far as practicable, near the age of the deceased. There were usually eight persons chosen to perform the office: the first four, the more prominent by reason of position or of intimacy, were called the bearers; the others, who were expected to relieve them from time to time, were called "under-bearers."¹ When the family turned to leave the grave, the eight, bearers and under-bearers, generally preceded them, and stood uncovered at the entrance of the cemetery, four on each side, till the procession had passed out.

New measures, even if improvements, are seldom welcome, and in many towns the proposal to purchase a hearse met with fierce opposition. It was thought to be treating the dead with disrespect if any but human strength were employed to carry them to their last resting-place,—it was inhuman to deny them the last service that neighbor or friend could render them.² For some time the hearse was driven only to the gate of the cemetery, the bier then carried to the grave. A bier was seen in the cemetery of South Middleboro' in May, 1893.

¹ The master of ceremonies, in his address of thanks, commenced, "Bearers and under-bearers, friends and neighbors."

² In the seventeenth century the sedan-chairs, used to carry living persons, were introduced into England, and were greatly opposed, on different grounds. It was said to be disgraceful and insulting to human beings—an attempt to "degrade free-born Englishmen into beasts of burden."

The mourning rings — many are still in existence — were sometimes presented at the funeral to the bearers, sometimes purchased with money left by will for that purpose. They were of different styles, some set with hair, others inscribed with name and date, or the popular “skull and cross-bones.” I have seen one in the form of a wreath in black and gold, encircled with the inscription, “Madm. L. Dudley, OB. 24 Octo. 1756. Æ. 72.” It was presented, I am told, to Judge Cushing, of Massachusetts.

Funeral cards, sent to friends, sometimes give the date and place both of death and interment, sometimes adding a verse of Scripture or of elegiac poetry. The custom has never been so general here as abroad. In British newspapers the words “no cards” sometimes follow the notice of a death.

In walking through old cemeteries, one must be impressed with the lack of variety among epitaphs and decorations. Of the latter it is a question which are in worse taste, — the unpleasant little cherubs suggestive of the place whither the departed is supposed to have gone, or the ghastly skull and cross-bones belonging to the earthly tabernacle which he has left behind. Of the former, one is almost tempted to say, as the dying French critic remarked of the “style” of his confessor who tried to describe the bliss of heaven, they are “enough to put one out of conceit with the subject.” Scripture furnishes consolatory passages enough to express the sorrow and hope of every afflicted soul beneath the skies; but, reading many of these trite old-fashioned phrases, I am reminded of the words of the old stone-cutter in Hawthorne’s sketch, “these inscriptions seem to stretch to suit a great grief, and shrink to fit a small one.”

I cannot tell when the custom arose, but I know that it was customary in New England some sixty or seventy years ago to announce a suicide in the list of deaths by a euphemism, — as, “In this city, 1st instant, A. B. suddenly.” It was so common that, on seeing such a notice, any one would understand at once that the deceased had taken his own life. Those were the days when newspapers understood and respected a certain degree of reserve in regard to personal feeling, whether of joy or sorrow. Individuals had some privacy.

Another euphemism in regard to death is the phrase, “if anything should happen.” Persons speak of making their will, or making any definite arrangement concerning their possessions, “in case anything should happen to them.” The phrase is almost invariably used where death is hourly expected, certain things are to be done, or certain persons called, “if anything should happen,” — meaning that one thing which is sure to happen.

Another old fashion which I observed in Great Britain is not yet extinct in New England. It is, applying the word "poor" to departed friends, whatever may have been their condition or circumstances. There are still old-fashioned persons who always speak of relatives, perhaps half a century dead, as "my poor mother," "my poor sister." It sounds strange to unaccustomed ears, but it is a tender old fashion, after all.

Mourning-pieces, as they are called, are still occasionally to be seen; a monument surmounted by a funeral urn bears the name of some dead relative, and weeping friends stand beside the grave. These were prepared to suit all sorts of bereavements, and the group is selected accordingly. In one, the ornament of a parlor that I have often seen, a father and two little daughters, all clad in mourning, are gazing at the tomb of the wife and mother. Some, of an early date, are specimens of fine embroidery. They are far more pleasing than the ghastly decoration which many persons even now preserve, — a funeral wreath surrounding a coffin-plate.

To those of us who are fond of the study of language, and remember that words are history, it is interesting to observe that we retain in common speech many phrases that belong to customs now obsolete. We speak of the ashes of the dead in our cemeteries, although we may be bitter opponents of cremation; the bier is a figurative term in common use; the "bearers" are still chosen, though their office is merely nominal; and the very word "funeral," applied to a ceremony almost always performed by day, is derived from the torches or tapers (from the Latin *funiculi*, small cords covered with wax) burned at the last rites, which usually took place at night.

We have heard of persons who "enjoyed a funeral," and there is more truth than poetry in the statement. Sir Walter Scott speaks of his father as having enjoyed a funeral; he adds, that his presence adorned one, and among his qualifications was the fact of his being a thorough and enthusiastic genealogist. To one who has ever heard the comments by some aged person on hearing of the death of a contemporary, the remark is interesting and intelligible. How the history of the family is recalled, marriages, births, and deaths detailed, with anecdotes of the defunct and all his kin! All this information came in play when the list of mourning relatives was prepared, when the due order of precedence must be observed with as much care as was ever needed by seneschal renowned in song and romance.

The gathering of friends and neighbors, — the opportunity of a social chat with those from a distance, — for persons whose life was barren of incident, to whom there came no daily news, whose journeys were few and far between, let us have charity if sometimes,

where the heart was untouched, they did not find a funeral an occasion of unrelieved sadness. Then, too, to one with a keen sense of humor, even now, perhaps, it is a milder way of stating a fact to say that the sources of smiles and tears lie very near together.

That is a touching story told of the funeral of Sir Walter Scott: the road by which the procession took its way wound over a hill whence can be seen one of the most beautiful of landscapes. It was his habit to pause there to gaze upon the scene, and when taking a friend out to drive, he never failed to stop there and call the attention of his companion to the most beautiful points of the view. Few could refrain from tears when, carrying their master on his last journey, the horses stopped at the old familiar spot, as it were for him to give a last look at the scene he had loved so well.

Extremes meet. I told this anecdote of Scott's funeral to a friend, who in turn told me a story. A little less than a century ago, there lived in a certain New England village a graceless fellow who spent most of his time at the grog-shop, to the neglect of all honest calling. When the summons had at last come for him

To join
The innumerable caravan that moves
To the pale realms of shade,

as his funeral procession, on its way to the place of burial, passed his favorite haunt, the bearers inadvertently turned a little aside, at the same time slackening their pace. The wag of the neighborhood spoke hastily: "Go on! go on!" said he; "don't stop here, for mercy's sake! He'll be sure to go in!"

Pamela McArthur Cole.